

AMABLE TASTU



**A Tacky Little Portrait
of a Forgotten Avant-Gardist**
Two Poems – *Poverty: Ode* & *Groan*

Poverty Ode

“Perch’ una gente impera, e l’altra langue.”¹

– Dante

Look at her, you say? What?! that’s a young girl
I doted on once, in her family’s heart,
so pure in freshness her beguiling charms!
Can it be that this flower’s already wilted,
and by passing ten times, the year’s
so aged this brow of sixteen years?

We find youth typically more sluggardly to flee.
So what roguish breeze has grazed this feeble plant?
What fleeting chill has shocked her dampened leaves,
to see thus stripped of their boundless grace
her brittle and jaundiced leafage,
and her calyx cropped? . . .

1 “For one people rules, and the other languishes.”

Poverty! . . . , any of you who, fawned on by Fortune,
have never suffered its hideous visit,
for you its conception's a hazy vision;
but our dampened hearths, our desolate tables,
our lodgings exposed to the gale,
are the least of the evils it forges!

Poverty! . . . all perishes beneath its savage talon!
That luminous spirit, whose spark's still alive,
which crackles in your eyes like a winter fire,
is abruptly obscured, and you slip into gloaming.
Do you know what somber snow
is cushioning this lucid light? . . .

Poverty! . . . this heart, whose lofty noblesse
which long gleamed through gloom and was never frail,
now renounces today what it was yesterday?
Seek minutely the secret of so swift a fall,
and what yoke of lead or shame
has contorted this honour so proud?

Poverty! this word, who among you can hear it?
To go stripped of every comfort you should count on;
living young without joy, and coupling without spouse,
while toiling day and night the hearth devours
a lustre that for so long till now
had been reprieved by covetous time;

to bear ceaselessly each of life's burdens;
its imperatives, oppressed without respite,
to shuttle from one to the next, to feed it turn by turn,
like the passerine, grain by grain, drop by drop,
with never an hour without its price,
no day not payed for with a day.

To obey, having never found your bearings,
the suppressed drone of that sovereign voice,
which agitates silence or dominates what's loud;
and whenever you seek retreat or the crowd,
to feel the moment fleeting past,
wrecked by the moment which follows.

At tribulation's blows, spent at last from subjugation,
to abjectly invoke, too feeble in the fray,
relief to which one might be chained for ever;
and, as the conclusive burden, haul one's own rebukes,
discover that the soul's dignity
buckles under penury's load;

There, that's poverty for you! – So where's your justice,
my Lord? With how many evils your power sympathizes!
And yet, finding your splendour's gifts barren,
Those with cursed minds, those with impotent souls,
proclaim to us vain and futile,
our beliefs in your bounty!

Is this how you think the supreme sovereignty
bears witness, through allocation, to your greatness?
through haughty courtesans, horny oligarchs,
just as if their mantle shook from the gravel
the pearls that with a queen's eyes
sowed their luxurious disdain.

But you, Lord! through whom all's linked and ranked,
who laid out for each her lot, her end, her place;
your order is your glory, like all perfect gifts!
So who is it has impudently mangled your work?

What nefarious power defames you
by paralyzing your benevolence?

Why, among your voices, so many voices spurned?
for a single fruit which ripens, so many blooms aborted?
so many seeds escaped from the sower's cob?
How is it that, for no one's good, all this good is
squandered,
and that fate's hand does away with
so much joy to slake one single joy?

In vain the soul inquires, rebellious and probing,
where resides the key to this inscrutable law:
not a single quest has achieved it yet!
Unendingly it suffers for ends it mustn't guess,
grows old still groping for it,
and never having grasped it, dies!

Groan

O world! o life! o time! phantoms, shades obscure,
Which fatigue my faltering steps until the end,
When shall those days return when your hands cradled
more,
Your gaze so caressing, your covenant so sure?
Never, oh! never again!

Daylight is snuffed out in the tears wherein I drown;
The charms of the night pass unapprehended
Night, day, springtime, winter, can I savour naught
around?
My heart still beats with pain, but joyful pounds
Never, oh! Never again!

— translated by Olchar E. Lindsann

The poet Amable Tastu (known as *Madame Tastu*) grew up in French proto-Romantic circles; her mother translated Schiller and English Romantic texts. Tastu's father had been a professional heraldic painter, so his entire craft and industry, which catered to the aristocracy, was wiped out with the French Revolution. Tastu was therefore quite familiar in childhood with the luxury of the ruling classes, while living much of her own life in poverty. She was early involved with the generally right-wing Romanticist 'Muse Française' group with Charles Nodier, Victor Hugo, and Alfred de Vigny, but along with them she shifted liberal by 1830, and became close to the Cénacle group.

MONOCLE-LASH REVENANTS

FORGOTTEN AVANT-GARDISTS TLP # 4

The Forgotten Avant-Gardists TLP series provides short introductions to those who have played vital roles in developing and maintaining the avant-garde, but have dropped out of our communal consciousness over the course of two centuries. These TLPs are incitements to further research, and place-holders until more research and work can be done to represent them fully within the contemporary avant-garde network.

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